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Texas AFT Policy Brief

Teaching Quality

Texas AFT supports professional standards because Texas students need and deserve professional educators in their classrooms.

The students in every Texas classroom need a fully qualified teacher to help them achieve their full learning potential. Individuals who choose to become classroom teachers must be able to demonstrate that they know their subjects and that they can help their students learn.

This is nowhere more true than in schools serving high concentrations of disadvantaged students who face the greatest hurdles to academic success. Unfortunately, teachers in these schools where teaching skills are most needed are far less likely to be fully qualified than those working in less challenging schools, even in key subjects such as mathematics.

Currently the state faces a severe shortage of teachers properly prepared to teach the subjects they are assigned to cover in their classrooms. The supply of fully qualified teachers willing to work in our schools under current conditions is limited by the constrained resources our state devotes to teacher compensation, to financial aid offsetting the costs of preparing to teach, and to supports for teachers once they are hired.

Some policymakers and advocacy groups would artificially address the shortage of fully qualified teachers by lowering certification standards to increase the supply of officially licensed teachers. But such a policy would amount to consumer deception, creating a facade to hide the reality of an unqualified teaching corps. Predictably, the employment of a new cadre of unqualified teachers would be concentrated in those schools with a dearth of fully certified teachers.

The best way to ensure an adequate supply of well-trained teachers in our classrooms is not to lower standards, but rather to strengthen them—by bringing greater resources and research-based best practices to teacher preparation, to teacher induction, and to continuing support for working teachers. These are the measures most likely to place fully qualified teachers in classrooms and to enable new and veteran teachers to succeed.

Texas AFT supports traditional and alternative routes to teacher preparation that meet certain fundamental criteria. They must require candidates to demonstrate subject knowledge in the

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appropriate content areas and the ability to teach that knowledge. They must provide candidates with up-to-date and useful knowledge about teaching. And they must allow candidates to test and refine their abilities in the classroom en route to attaining full certification as classroom teachers.

Good teaching leads to good learning.

The factors influencing how well students learn are many and varied. Some have little or no direct connection to a child's time in school, occurring before or outside of formal education. For example, students' health has a major effect on their ability to learn. Hence Texas AFT supported establishment of our state's Children's Health Insurance Program and has consistently advocated increased CHIP funding to provide more children with more and better health services. As educators, however, our primary focus is on how we can promote student learning directly.

A broad consensus, based on a large body of clear and compelling evidence, recognizes that teacher quality is the most important school factor in student achievement. [Goldhaber 2006; Rivkin, Hanushek and Kain 2005] The plain fact is that teaching quality is critical to student learning.

Teacher preparation and support are keys to good teaching.

Educator standards must be based on proven research and real-world experience. Some recent scholarship on teacher quality has emphasized the outcome of teachers' work—usually as measured by student scores on standardized assessments, equating those scores with so-called “teacher effectiveness”—over inputs such as pre-service training or characteristics such as experience in the field. [Goe 2007] However, whether the “effectiveness” of individual teachers can be measured reliably in this fashion is, at best, an open question and whether doing so will improve student learning is entirely unknown. [McCaffrey, et al. 2003]

Meanwhile, considerable evidence and experience already have shown that preparing new teachers for the classroom and providing new and veteran teachers with professional peer support will improve student learning. A teacher's mastery of the subject matter, understanding of how diverse students can best learn that subject matter, and skills in applying that mastery and understanding all figure prominently in students' success. [Allen 2003; Fallon 2003; Darling-Hammond and Youngs 2002] The correlation between teacher qualifications and positive student learning outcomes has been shown to be particularly pronounced in mathematics. [Fuller 2005a; Fuller 2002b; Monk & King 1994]

Teaching is a hard job. A good induction system with lots of support for teachers through peer assistance and review will encourage both new teachers and accomplished veterans to remain in teaching. New entrants need enormous support and, from time to time, so do some experienced

teachers. When it's not provided, teachers leave—and our kids are shortchanged. As strapped districts waste money on an endless cycle of recruitment and hiring, children's education suffers from teacher turnover. With peer assistance and review programs, new teachers benefit from intensive assistance and training from skilled colleagues. All teachers and their students benefit from the sharing of knowledge and skills among peers. [American Federation of Teachers 2007]

Experience with programs such as the State Board for Educator Certification's Texas Beginning Educator Support System (TxBESS) shows that teacher mentoring programs provide considerable benefits to all involved. New teachers receiving assistance benefit from the knowledge, skills, and experiences of accomplished colleagues. Teachers acting as mentors earn additional income and peer recognition and hone their own teaching skills. Districts see lower personnel costs through lower turnover among teachers receiving assistance and those providing it. In 2000, the cost of teacher turnover in Texas was estimated to total at least \$329 million and as much as \$2.1 billion each year. [Texas Center for Educational Research 2000] The most important benefit of mentoring and other peer assistance, of course, is that students learn and achieve more through better teaching.

The late American Federation of Teachers president Sandra Feldman, speaking at the White House Conference on Preparing Quality Teachers in 2002, poignantly testified from personal experience to the importance of mentoring. Feldman noted that she had come into teaching without conventional preparation: "We were able to enter teaching without having gone through a teacher preparation program, on the strength of our liberal arts and subject matter education and our ability to pass a written exam demonstrating that knowledge and our literacy. Then we were given a classroom full of kids and left to sink or swim. I sank." Feldman dropped out of teaching after one year—just as 15 percent or so of new teachers do today. When she tried teaching again a few years later, she was assigned to a school where "teachers took me under their wing and the principal gave me time to spend in the classrooms of experienced colleagues. And this time, after my first year, I stayed, and I excelled."

Texas should do much more to support mentoring. State appropriations for mentoring are set at \$15 million each for the 2007-08 and 2008-09 fiscal years. That works out to merely \$500 or so for each of the more than 27,000 newly certified teachers produced each year in Texas—not enough to cover the cost of mentoring for more than a fraction of those newcomers.

The number of fully qualified teachers working in Texas schools is insufficient.

There is an identifiable and persistent shortage of fully qualified teachers working in Texas schools. During the 2000-01 school year, some 40,138 to 45,155 teachers were teaching out of their field of certification, depending on how strictly that field is defined. In the 2001-02 school year, those numbers rose to 42,808 to 56,551. [Fuller 2002a] The rate of out-of-field teaching in Texas public schools averaged 26 percent over the four school years 2000-01 to 2003-04. [State

Board for Educator Certification 2004] Rates of out-of-field teaching were similarly high during the 2004-2005 school year: 31 percent among pre-K and kindergarten teachers, 17 percent for elementary teachers, 34 percent for middle school teachers, and 38 percent for high school teachers. [Texas Institute for Education Reform 2007]

This shortage is even worse in key subject areas. In 1999, 17 percent of full-time-equivalent math teachers in Texas public schools were not fully certified. Nineteen percent of full-time-equivalent science teachers and 14 percent of FTE special education teachers were not fully certified. Thirty percent of FTE Bilingual and ESL teachers and 42 percent of FTE ESL teachers were not fully certified. [Fuller 2006]

Students most in need of qualified teachers are too often least likely to have them.

Lack of access to fully qualified teachers is a problem across Texas, but it is most acute in schools serving students who most need fully qualified teachers. Teachers in schools serving predominantly minority or low-income students and in schools with lower accountability ratings are significantly more likely to lack appropriate certification than those in other schools.

In Texas middle schools during the 2001-02 school year, 50 percent of mathematics teachers were teaching out-of-field in middle schools where more than 75 percent of students were economically disadvantaged. At middle schools with more than 75 percent minority students, the percentage of out-of-field math teachers was 53 percent. This pattern was repeated for middle school science teachers in those schools. [Fuller 2002b] In Texas high schools during that same year, 31 percent of Algebra I teachers were teaching out-of-field in high schools where the percentage of economically disadvantaged students was more than 75 percent. For schools with more than 75 percent minority students, the percentage of out-of-field math teachers was 30 percent. This pattern was repeated throughout math, science and the remainder of the core curriculum. [Fuller 2003] In 2004, 63 percent of core-course teachers in low-performing Texas high schools were assigned to teach outside their field. In contrast, only 18 percent of core-course teachers at high schools rated exemplary were teaching out of field. [Fuller 2004]

This problem affects students directly. Students in classrooms without an appropriately certified teacher tend to have lower achievement scores. This problem has been demonstrated nationally and in Texas, where, for example, the lack of appropriately certified math teachers in middle schools serving predominantly African-American children correlates strongly with lower scores on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills for mathematics. [Clotfelter et al 2006; Fuller 2005a; Fuller 2002b; Jordan et al 1997; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future 1996; Oakes 1990]

Recruiting and retaining well-qualified teachers in troubled schools is an especially difficult challenge. Improved working conditions and properly designed incentives are keys to providing

fully qualified teachers for students in these “hard to staff” schools. Survey data show that teachers are more likely to come to such a school—and stay—if it has an effective principal, safe and clean facilities, opportunities for professional development and collaboration, supportive conditions that include teachers’ voices in decision-making, and the resources to help struggling students. Along with these improved working conditions, pay incentives bargained at the local level can help these schools attract and keep well-qualified teachers. [American Federation of Teachers 2007]

We must retain experienced, qualified teachers and attract new, qualified teachers to meet students’ needs.

Some have responded to a shortage of credentialed teachers in key subject areas with calls to lower standards for teacher licensure or even to eliminate licensure standards altogether. We know, however, that qualified teachers promote student learning. A license to teach is meaningless if it does not reflect that fact. Lowering licensure standards would indeed be a perversion of our aim to promote learning and academic achievement.

We must increase the supply of truly qualified teachers, not simply individuals who hold a license. This is especially true for disadvantaged students. Data and experience indicate that substandard certificate holders are much more likely to end up in schools serving those children than in schools attended by more advantaged students. [Fuller 2005a; Fuller 2002b]

Increasing that supply will require a mixture of approaches. We must encourage experienced, proven teachers to remain in the profession. This will require adequate pay and benefits, meaningful ongoing support and professional development, and other measures. We will also need to make entry into the profession more attractive. Adequate pay and benefits are important here also, and so is lowering the cost of teacher preparation, particularly for participants who are likely to work in subject areas and with student populations where the need is greatest.

We must address barriers to attracting new teachers with policies that maintain high standards.

Critics of high teacher-quality standards have suggested that such standards create an unreasonable barrier to entry into the profession and, therefore deny students the benefit of a certified teacher. Clearly, though, high quality standards are an appropriate and quite reasonable hurdle for new teachers.

However, one unnecessary barrier to the teaching profession that can and should be addressed is the cost of preparation to enter the profession. Those interested in pursuing a teaching career are understandably daunted by the prospect of paying thousands of dollars toward certification for employment with relatively low compensation, especially given the marketability in other occupations of the knowledge and skills required for teaching. Texas should increase

significantly the funding for the two state programs available—Teach for Texas and the Educational Aide Exemption—to offset those costs of conventional and alternative certification and should market these programs aggressively. Teach for Texas funding peaked at \$10 million in 2003 and is now less than half that amount. Educational Aide Exemption funding peaked at almost \$12 million in 2005 and is now under \$10 million. Further, marketing of these programs appears largely targeted toward individuals already in the profession or in a preparation program. Marketing them more widely could influence others to consider teaching.

Mid-career and retired professionals, often considered a significant potential source of new teachers, face additional financial barriers. Obviously, many now working in other fields would take a considerable pay cut to make the transition into teaching. Less well known is the impact of two Social Security provisions, the Government Pension Offset (GPO) and the Windfall Elimination Provision (WEP). The GPO and WEP reduce considerably Social Security benefits already earned by workers who also receive retirement benefits from employment not covered by Social Security. The vast majority of Texas public school teachers—well over 90 percent—work in districts that do not participate in Social Security. Individuals who have already spent years working in Social Security-covered employment and then go to work in one of these districts stand to lose significant benefits thanks to their career change. The state of Texas should join with the dozen or so other states where teacher recruitment is similarly affected by these Social Security offsets to lobby Congress for the repeal of the GPO and WEP.

Conclusion

Research shows that schools with teachers appropriately certified in the subject taught deliver better student performance. Yet the use of uncertified and inappropriately certified teachers is commonplace in Texas public schools. Nearly one out of five persons assigned to teach in our schools lacks the appropriate certification for at least one class period per day. The problem is especially acute in math classes, in bilingual and special education, and in the early elementary grades. This situation undermines state efforts to raise levels of student achievement.

Accordingly, Texas AFT supports:

- guaranteeing an appropriately certified teacher in every classroom;
- increasing teacher pay and benefits to match private-sector compensation for positions demanding comparable knowledge and skills;
- closing loopholes in the state's standards for teacher qualifications;
- providing incentives to retain and recruit qualified teachers, such as tuition scholarships for teachers who earn additional certification in shortage areas;
- providing stipends for those who gain exceptional credentials by demonstrating mastery-level knowledge and skills through rigorous programs such as National Board Certification;
- providing stipends for teachers who mentor colleagues; and

- providing stipends for appropriately certified teachers who teach subjects for which the shortage of teachers is acute or who agree to teach in hard-to-staff schools.

The critical and demanding work of educating Texas schoolchildren requires teachers with demonstrated subject-matter knowledge and ability to enhance student learning. We have an obligation to our students to guarantee their access to the high-quality teachers, teaching, and resources they need to be successful.

About this Policy Brief

In this document, Texas AFT provides to our members, policy makers, and the interested public an overview of an important education policy issue. We present the essential facts, related current research, and steps to address the issue. For more information, please visit our Web site at www.texasaft.org or contact us at 512-448-0130.

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